

# Evaluation of Gifted Program Services in

## York County School Division

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Evaluator

The notes below represent an assessment of the current “state of affairs” of services offered to gifted students in the York County School Division (the EXTEND Center, cluster classroom differentiation, and EXTEND classes at the middle school level). The summaries and recommendation are based on interviews, focus groups, classroom observations of both EXTEND and general education classrooms, and a review of documents provided to the evaluator by the school division administrators and teachers in the EXTEND Center (e.g., state gifted plan, reports of the GEAC, transportation schedules, class schedules, enrollment data, curriculum outlines).

The summary focuses on the program components of: Programs and Service Delivery Models, Curriculum and Instruction, Staff Development, and Communication. Additional comments are made on the Screening and Identification process as this topic was raised by nearly every stakeholder group. While the program components are addressed individually, there is considerable overlap as with all educational programs. At the beginning of each section I have included brief statements of the standards for gifted programming of the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) that served as guideposts for my evaluation. Then I identified what I perceive to be areas worthy of commendation and areas that are of concern. I also offer recommendations for future planning and program revision.

# PROGRAM SERVICES

## PROGRAM DESIGN

- Rather than any single gifted program, a continuum of programming services must exist for gifted learners.
- Gifted education must be adequately funded.
- Gifted education programming must evolve from a comprehensive and sound base.
- Gifted education programming services must be an integral part of the general education school day.
- Flexible groupings of students must be developed in order to facilitate differentiated instruction and curriculum in the general classroom.
- Policies specific to adapting and adding to the nature and operations of the general education program are necessary for gifted education.

## COMMENDATIONS

- The York County School Division (YCSD) has recognized that traditional curriculum and instruction in the general education classroom are not sufficiently engaging for gifted and talented learners and has attempted to provide options for extending the learning experiences for gifted students. These options at the elementary level include both cluster grouping in the general education classroom and once-day-per-week services at the EXTEND Center. The commitment to cluster grouping at the Division level as a complement to the one-day-per-week is commendable in recognition that gifted students are not only gifted one day a week.
- The YCSD has recognized that gifted students should receive differentiated services.
- The parents of elementary school students in focus groups indicated that their children have expressed the opinions that opportunity to be “out of the boring general education classroom” and to be with intellectual peers were the major highlights of the EXTEND center programming. The opportunity to spend time with “like-minded peers” is particularly valued by the parents of

identified gifted students. This sentiment was affirmed in the parent survey administered by the EXTEND program.

- The availability of “specialized” teachers for the gifted has created a cadre of individuals who are dedicated to the well-being and development of gifted students is also commendable. The staff at the EXTEND Center are endorsed in gifted education and knowledgeable about the characteristics of gifted students and can express principles of quality curriculum and appropriate instructional strategies for teaching gifted students.
- The parents of gifted students recognize the commitment the teachers at the EXTEND Center to understand and support gifted students. The current options are regarded as providing spaces where gifted children can “feel at ease,” “form close bonds with others of like ability and be part of a community,” and “be understood.”
- The “freedom” of movement and the stress on “thinking” in the gifted classrooms is valued by the parents of gifted students.
- Parents in the focus group raised concern about bussing, missed class time, and making up missed work in the general education classes. However, the parents of *elementary level* students in the focus groups did not seem to mind their children taking the bus or making up work, perhaps because they view the program as providing sufficient challenge (or at least relief from the lack of interesting work in the general education classroom) and freedom to make those inconveniences negligible to them.
- Clustering of the teachers at the EXTEND Center creates a synergy of commitment and energy that contributes to a healthy and positive work environment for teachers and a positive and supportive environment for students.

- Parents of students served at the EXTEND Center are strong advocates for the current model, which they view as a stark contrast to the learning environments of their children the other four days of the week.
- In revising the YCSD Gifted Program Plan, the Coordinator assembled a group of more than 30 stakeholders with wide Division representation. Further, the NAGC Program Standards were used as standards for evaluation of the past plans and development of the new plan. The group attempted to integrate issues of equity throughout the new plan.

## **PROBLEMS, ISSUES, AND CONCERNS**

### **EXTEND**

- The EXTEND Center is seen as an independent and isolated unit.
- Stakeholders in parent, teacher, and administrative focus groups all indicated that there are major issues with the logistics of travel to the EXTEND Center. These issues ranged from delays in arrival at the EXTEND Center because of bus scheduling, to long bus rides for some students, to shortened instructional time at the EXTEND Center.
- Given the very low evaluation of challenge in the general education classroom and descriptions of gifted students being bored, the gifted services likely are seen as a valuable contrast even when they may not be “all they can be.” This raises the issue of the appropriateness of the general education classroom and curriculum for gifted students because the majority of their school day/week is in the general education classroom. The current curricular and instructional offerings as part of the cluster group arrangements were not deemed by parents to offer sufficient challenge. Observations in general education classrooms confirmed assertions that little or no differentiation beyond tiered reading groups occurs in the general education classroom.
- The teachers in the general education classrooms and the building level administrators are largely unconvinced that there is great added value from student participation in the EXTEND Center or

EXTEND classes at the middle school. This may reflect a communication issue rather than a judgement about appropriateness of services and the curriculum and instruction offered at the Center. The substance of the comments relating to services indicate a lack of knowledge about what is offered and concerns about both missed time from the general education program and perceptions that the curriculum is not really challenging and is representative curriculum and instruction that could be offered to all students.

- According to parents, principals and central office personnel are inconsistent in the application of acceleration policies in the school division; policy varies by administrator and differs from school to school and year to year.
- The degree to which EXTEND students are required to make up missed classroom work seems to vary considerably from teacher to teacher.
- Housing the EXTEND Center program at only one elementary site and bussing students to the site results in great inefficiency in the use of personnel resources. Much student time is wasted in the transportation to the school and the loss of student instructional time is unwarranted. Further, this arrangement wastes valuable teacher time. Looking at the schedule posted on-line and observing the classrooms accentuates the loss of time. The “day” at the center is only from 9:30 to 2:30 (with effective dismissal at 2:20 to go to the busses) with an hour break for lunch and recess. The middle school teacher teaches only two blocks per day at the middle school and there is no clear sense of integration of the EXTEND teacher with the school or the staff of the school. Further, all stakeholder groups noted that often the busses are late with pickup at the school and deliver at the EXTEND Center and that on any day that is less than a full instructional day (e.g. days with early release or delayed openings; SOL testing days) the students do not attend the EXTEND Center at all providing the teachers a full day with no instructional responsibility. The use of the same instructional units

every day of a week (the same lessons are repeated daily with a new group of grade level students) and over several years mitigates then need for the extensive planning time allotted each day.

- While some clerical work (e.g., scoring of tests and teacher rating scales) may, at certain times of the year fill the time before and/or after school one should question use of teachers to carry out these tasks given the clerical staff available to the Center. The planning time each morning and afternoon and the non-instructional days may be appreciated by the teachers, but on balance the current schedule and curricular emphasis is very inefficient programming. The schedule as is also raises equity concerns relative to other instructional staff. Further, the administrative/teaching balance for the Coordinator should be examined to determine whether the best use is being made of this resource.
- The EXTEND Center teachers are not integrated into the staff of the school where they teach or with the other teachers in YCSD. There has been little to no opportunity for systematic communication among the EXTEND teachers and the general education teachers about the ways the curriculum and instruction at the EXTEND Center is complementary, enriching or an accelerated option for the students served in the Center.
- Despite the proximity of the EXTEND Center to Dare Elementary School the counseling and special education resource support of Dare have not been tapped with the result that the EXTEND Center program has reportedly been reluctant to enroll students with handicapping conditions or behavioral issues who might be twice-exceptional. The Coordinator reports that at least one student with behavioral issues attends classes at the EXTEND Center, but teachers and administrators from across the school division report numerous incidents when twice-exceptional students were refused placement based on the lack of support services.
- The issue of sufficiency of service was raised repeatedly. The notion prevailed across focus groups that one day per week at the EXTEND Center did not compensate for 4 other days in the general

education classroom where the instruction was boring, repetitive of already learned skills and knowledge, or at a pace that was too slow.

- The EXTEND Center class size is surprising small, not diverse in character, nor sufficiently representative of schools across the YCSD. While the Coordinator pointed to an expected increase in class sizes because of new placements, these placements were occurring after half of the school year had elapsed with the very small class sizes observed and in the official records and there was no evidence the new placements would increase the diversity of the classrooms.
- Lower enrollments in current offerings at the middle school are evidence that the services currently offered do not meet the needs of the students or are not attractive enough to warrant missing other classes. Parents raised issues about the engagement of students and the appeal of curricular options offered at the middle school level.

#### **CLUSTER GROUPS IN THE GENERAL EDUCATION CLASSROOM**

- The current clustering arrangement in general education classroom is a first step, but implementation of differentiated curriculum for gifted students in the general education classrooms has been unsuccessful in general for several reasons:
  - Inadequate considerations of qualifications and inconsistency in assignment of teachers for cluster classroom. In some cases, the principals have sought teachers with endorsement or some specific training in gifted education for the assignment, but most often that is not the case. And in some schools the assignment of teachers to cluster classroom is “rotated among teachers” with a misplaced nod to fairness to the teachers. This assumption of fairness makes it unlikely teachers will develop instructional or curricular options for gifted students because they will not have that assignment again. The consideration should be for the best situation for the students not the teachers.
  - Lack of consistent staff development programming on differentiation.

- Lack of resources (differentiated lessons based on the core curriculum, supplemental reading and computer resources, etc.). Cluster classroom teachers noted that they do receive specific resources when they ask (from the EXTEND teachers), but that they are not prepared well-enough in differentiation or appropriate curriculum and instruction for gifted students to even know what to ask for.
- The application of guidelines for staffing cluster classrooms is inconsistent. Some principles identify teachers with background and training in gifted education and consistently assign gifted students to those classrooms. Other principles view this assignment as a “reward to teachers” and assign on that basis; others rotate the assignment with an ill-conceived notion of “fairness,” and other simply seek volunteers.
- Assignment of identified gifted students to cluster classrooms is also inconsistent. In some schools, gifted students are still “scattered” across classrooms resulting in as few as 2 identified students per classroom at each grade level – a number unlikely to inspire a teacher to develop a differentiated protocol across lessons; in other schools as many as 9 identified students are assigned to a cluster classroom. This assignment does not necessarily reflect proportions or numbers of identified students in a school.
- Despite promises that assignment of identified students to his/her classroom would protect them from distracting levels of classroom diversity such as children representing many different types and levels of handicapping conditions, many cluster teachers report being assigned students who are gifted and also students with a diverse array of handicapping conditions and behavioral issues. The normal triage for these teachers would always be to prioritize the needs of the students with handicaps or behavioral issues or to students who are likely to be disruptive or struggle to meet minimal standards or those who have strong advocates in the room (special education resource teachers) and make gifted students as second level priority.

- Cluster group teachers are most often not endorsed in gifted education nor has the school division provided intensive staff development, coaching, or supervisory support.
- Building level administrators do not evaluate cluster teachers on the curriculum or instruction offered to gifted students nor have they had the staff development that would provide them the knowledge to carry out such evaluation.

### **General**

- The lack of consistency in individuals assigned to provide oversight to the EXTEND Center and cluster classroom arrangements has contributed to the issues note above and to the curriculum and instructional issues noted in the next section of the report.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Consider decentralizing the EXTEND services to serve students in their home schools (as an alternative consider two centers located so that bus travel is minimized). In either case, the savings from transportation and the recovery of instructional time that is lost by student travel and having to supervise lunch and recess will allow for additional staff resources that can be deployed to adequately provide for additional instructional minutes for each gifted child in each school. Teachers' recovered time can also be used to develop differentiated lessons collaboratively with general education classroom teachers. The teachers in the EXTEND program may have to serve more than one school, but scheduling is quite feasible given the size of the school division. Housing the services in each school will also make it possible to schedule so that students with advanced needs in one academic area can also be served with either push-in or a resource room model. Housing the program in each school will also provide opportunities for the EXTEND teachers to provide a nurturing program in Title 1 schools for students in grades k-2. Housing the EXTEND teachers in schools will also provide opportunities for the EXTEND teachers to model differentiation and to work

collaboratively with cluster classroom teachers on differentiation of the SOLs for gifted students in their classrooms.

- If a model of school-based centers is adopted create opportunities for cross school interactions among gifted students.
- Consider the option of special placements of students with specific areas of mathematical or verbal ability in particular units of the EXTEND classes that address those talents. If EXTEND classes are school based these students can be identified and join the particular units as appropriate.
- Abandon the model of “enrichment” classes for EXTEND at the middle school and make the EXTEND program at the middle school a set of regular, advanced academic classes in language arts, science and mathematics. If there are insufficient numbers of identified students incorporate additional students with high achievement or potential as identified by teachers. Students should be scheduled into one or more of those classes according to identified talent area and interest. *Provide adequate staff development for middle school teachers to offer these classes at an advanced level for gifted students and also provide acceleration options for students who are identified as good candidates for that option.*
- Develop clear policies on the assignment of clusters of gifted students to classrooms with qualified teachers and with clear direction to implement policy.
- Provide administrators with background and guidance in evaluating general education teachers on the implementation of differentiated instruction for gifted students. The general education teachers have a rudimentary understanding of differentiation and sense of how to implement it for struggling learners so building on that foundation can serve as a base for administrative and teacher development in the area of differentiation.

# CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

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- Differentiated curriculum for the gifted learner must span grades pre-K–12.
  - Regular classroom curricula and instruction must be adapted, modified, or replaced to meet the unique needs of gifted learners.
  - Instructional pace must be flexible to allow for the accelerated learning of gifted learners as appropriate.
  - Educational opportunities for subject and grade skipping must be provided to gifted learners.
  - Learning opportunities for gifted learners must consist of a continuum of differentiated curricular options, instructional approaches, and resource materials.
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### COMMENDATIONS<sup>i</sup>:

- The curricular and instructional experiences offered in the EXTEND Center are perceived by parents of identified gifted students to be engaging and more challenging than the offerings in the general education classroom.
- Observations of the EXTEND classes documented a high level of student engagement in the learning activities.
- The EXTEND class teachers involve many outside resources representing expertise across content areas.
- The observations in the classroom documented a clear emphasis on development of advanced vocabulary, a demand for providing explanations, and insistence on providing evidence and reasoning behind conclusions and generalizations offered by students. Further, classroom observations documented an emphasis on abstract concepts (e.g., diminishing status of slave), inquiry, metacognition, and open-ended questioning rather than didactic lecture and reward for “finding the right answer.”

- The order and structure of the curricular documents are exemplary in their attention to order and structure. The instruction is organized to focus on content with skill development integrated. The teachers who developed the curriculum take care to explicate expectations relative to what students will know and understand upon completion of each unit.
- The structure of the curricular focus across disciplines including science, social studies, and mathematics represents commitment to ensuring the students learning meaningful content across disciplines.
- The authors of the units have included mention of principles excerpted from the gifted literature (e.g., depth and complexity, essential understanding).
- The EXTEND staff has engaged a curriculum expert to work with them on updating and improving their units.
- Adoption of the math curriculum from *Project M<sup>3</sup>: Mentoring Mathematical Minds* is a positive curricular decision based on the research evidence of its effectiveness.
- Some of the teachers with cluster classrooms who have had training and experience in serving gifted students have made forays into differentiation in their classrooms.

#### **PROBLEMS, ISSUES AND CONCERNS**

**(The issues presented below are based on review of curricular materials provided by EXTEND teachers and the classroom observations of individual lessons. While much more may be available in individual teachers' portfolios, these are the resources that were available to me. A comment was made that when the teacher who left the program "left nothing behind and the new person had to start from scratch in building units" that was a telling bit of information suggesting that the unit frameworks need to be accompanied by documented lesson plans.)**

## EXTEND

- There is no apparent scope and sequence of content or skill development-- either within grade level or across grade levels. The units stand as independent entities without clear connections between units in a given grade level or across grade levels.
- The curriculum is not clearly tied characteristics of gifted learners nor does it clearly reflective of the ways in which the distinguishing characteristics of gifted students' learning are addressed. While the content is regarded by stake holders as interesting to students and is more sophisticated in content level than the standard curriculum, the curriculum does not distinctly a clear understanding of increasing levels of abstraction, challenge, nor difficulty in content across the units. The curriculum lacks evidence of differentiation for the differing levels of aptitude or interests of students and fails to address ascending levels of intellectual development over time and across units. The curriculum lacks clear skill articulation; there is no evidence of increasing competency in skills across units in either product development skills or thinking skills. Because the curricular frameworks provided do not included sequences of lesson plans or clearly delineated ways in which resources are integrated into the lesson plans it is difficult to see how these resources (often on-grade-level resources) would be differentiated for gifted students' learning.
- The curriculum misses opportunity for the articulation of inter-disciplinary connections—another area in which curriculum can capitalize on the characteristics of gifted learners. For example, the task to “make a house” –how does that relate to math, science, art (e.g. gifted kids make connections)
- While the writers of the units have articulated a version of essential understandings, those which are articulated do not seem to be reflective of the general consensus of what an essential understanding should be (“...the strategy of teaching with essential (or enduring) understandings. It is wildly impactful for students—empowering them to connect concepts and knowledge across

grades and subjects and giving them the perspective to apply what they have learned to their immediate world and the greater world at large “([https://us.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-binaries/55780\\_glass\\_ch2\\_Essential\\_Understandings.pdf](https://us.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-binaries/55780_glass_ch2_Essential_Understandings.pdf))).

- The units should also be revised to incorporate universal concepts that characterize the learning (e.g., power, force, change, systems, and structure) and can be transferred across disciplines and
- There was no evidence of a differentiated k-8 curriculum within or across grade levels in which the SOLs were being adapted, modified, or replaced to meet the needs of the gifted, nor that accelerated options were consistently available. The SOLs are referenced in the curricular documents but the frameworks provided did not articulate connections between the SOLs and skills and content of the units. In the middle school class observed, the connection to social studies standards were articulated.
- The teachers identify essential understandings as underlying the development of curriculum, but observation in the classrooms did not validate integration of those ideas into instruction (at the elementary or middle school level).
- Products produced by the students were “cookie cutter” in nature. For example, in one classroom students were producing power point presentations and all had to use the same template and include the same orientation to presentation. The products which concluded units did not represent transformation or complex synthesis of ideas, but rather presentation of information gleaned from pre-determined websites or handouts. Products also did not represent “real life solutions to real life problems.” Rather, they seemed more to fit the “report” format whether written or oral and were contrived in many respects. (The teacher noted that the work was more “detailed,” which seemed to reflect finding more facts and specifics, not a more in-depth or complex understanding of the topic as it played out in the student work.) One exception to the prior generalization was a lesson led by a visiting artist who provided students with challenges of handling very advanced and

abstract concepts, presented the students with the task of producing an art product with choice in representation which was symbolic and obviously was challenging to the students in the class based on their positive struggles to go beyond concrete solutions. In cases where the teacher has made a serious attempt to introduce students to primary sources (commendable), the impact is diminished by also providing an explanation of what the source is saying—the meaning of the source.

- Performance assessments are based on the students reaching a set of stated standards clearly articulated to students. However, in one classroom observation the students were working on projects for which there was no guiding rubric that outlined clear standards for success or excellence. At least one posted unit (website) had a scoring rubric, but the rubric did not clearly delineate advanced concepts or skills that one might expect from gifted students as distinct from non-identified students. The student evaluation form (“report card”) has is primarily focused on process and does not reflect learning or achievement of the students in the units which were the basis of instruction.
- The EXTEND units do not identify evidence of pre-assessment or formative assessment that is used to adjust curriculum to student achievement or pace of learning.
- Parents of middle school students do not view the general education program as challenging or engaging as the elementary level curriculum.

#### **Cluster Classrooms**

- Teachers in the general education classroom feel extraordinary pressure to attend to the needs of those students struggling to succeed. They indicated that staff development is focused on these students, that the time and energy required to meet those students’ needs leaves little time to plan for high performing students, and that the model used in the literacy instruction seriously limits opportunity for differentiation in reading.

- Most cluster classrooms observed provided little or no differentiation aside from tiered reading. In one language arts lesson a student who reported she had read page 5 was told to read it again; a student who asked if he could read the next chapter and the whole book was told emphatically, “No!” All students were reading grade level books even though I was told that the lessons were based on DAS performance and several identified gifted students were in the classroom and finished reading tasks within minutes of starting. The first exception was a math class in which the teacher encouraged seeking and sharing alternative approaches to solving math problems, emphasized metacognition as students shared their solutions, and provided both support and challenge to students at different levels of proficiency in solving the tasks provided, and provided alternative problems through assignments of problems on the computers in the classroom. A second teacher provide alternative reading texts to students identified as gifted clearly aligned with reading levels and interests. The questioning by the teacher was a high level of challenge with emphasis on open-ended discussion, giving evidence for reasoning, and discovery. The products in this class, while limited in product options, were designed to emphasize sharing with others beyond the teacher in the class and provided for creativity of expression through the integration of ideas from the topic being studied. The two teachers in these classrooms had both taken classes in the gifted endorsement series.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Develop a set of overarching goals related to a clear mission for instruction for EXTEND. In conjunction with the goals and mission, develop a clear scope and sequence of curricular goals for gifted students in YCSD that includes revised essential questions and means of evaluation of progress toward meeting those goals in each unit developed and taught.
- Develop new units or modify existing units to address the shortcomings noted in the Problems, Issues and Concerns section of the Curriculum and Instruction review above. A complete curriculum

unit should offer an instructional blueprint with explanations of how the unit will be taught –not what just what students will do. A teacher should be able to look at the unit plan and know what to do, how to implement the unit with sequencing of lessons, directions for lessons, and integrated resources by lesson. The units should be more clearly tied to regular classroom instruction and should reinforce, extend, elaborate on the basic/ fundamental core curriculum—not necessarily by topic but by addressing the big ideas of the disciplines through more complex, challenging, in-depth, and sophisticated content and skills. Each unit should have an articulated purpose that addresses its usefulness in addressing learning characteristics of the gifted and contributing to a scope and sequence of learning within the school year and across school years and contributing to the overarching goals of the gifted program.

- Review current, research supported, curriculum materials that have been developed for use with gifted students for adoption at the elementary and middle school level. Units such as these will guide teachers in achieving those goals through direct use of the materials or appropriate modifications. In addition to the use of the materials developed by the University of Connecticut in mathematics, consider the units in science and social studies developed at the College of William and Mary and the language arts units developed at the University of Virginia –all supported by research documenting their effectiveness.
- Make the curricular offerings for middle school EXTEND part of the regular curricular offerings at each grade level across math, science and language arts with attention to the extension of the standard curriculum to incorporate the principles articulated in the first recommendation above.
- The teachers in cluster classrooms must be provided with time and other support for the preparation and development of the differentiated education plans, materials, and curriculum if there is any expectation that they will be able to provide services for gifted students in the general education classroom.

# PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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- A comprehensive staff development program must be provided for all school staff involved in the education of gifted learners.
- Only qualified personnel should be involved in the education of gifted learners.
- School personnel require support for their specific efforts related to the education of gifted learners.

## COMMENDATIONS

- Teachers in the EXTEND classes are endorsed in gifted education and many general education teachers have sought endorsement.
- The Coordinator of the program has been active in statewide associations which provides her access to current developments in gifted education, and has encouraged her staff to stay current with trends in gifted education.
- The Extend Center staff is regarded by other teachers and by building administrators as willing to offer staff development and to share resources when requests are made.
- The staff of the EXTEND Center has offered staff development opportunities to cluster classroom teachers upon request through face-to-face instruction and book circles.

## PROBLEMS, ISSUES, AND CONCERNS

- Teachers in the cluster classrooms report receiving little to no gifted specific professional development.
- YCSD relies heavily on general education teachers to evaluate students for gifted services using a specific rating scale, but there is no training on gifted behaviors and specifically no training for

general education teachers about how to recognize gifted behaviors in typically underrepresented populations of students.

- Principals have not been provided staff development in how to support or evaluate cluster classroom teachers in delivering differentiated curriculum and instruction to gifted students.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Provide workshops for cluster classroom teachers and building administrators on strategies to serve gifted students. Provide support for these teachers to enroll in classes on differentiation for gifted students in the general education classroom
- Create a culture where all staff understand gifted students do not become “ungifted” upon exit from the resource room.
- Provide support for the general and gifted education teachers in understanding how to relate the services provided in the resource room with curriculum in the regular classroom.
- Give attention in staff development to how students from low income populations might manifest characteristics of giftedness. Implement training on these behaviors and ensure teachers use a rating scale that directs attention to those characteristics of giftedness.
- Provide current teachers of the gifted specific in-service training to update and refine curricular offerings and instructional practice.

# COMMUNICATION

## PROBLEMS, ISSUES, AND CONCERNS

- Many staff of the school division are unaware of the mission and goals of the gifted education services.
- Many comments in focus groups of administrators and teachers indicated a lack of knowledge about program and curriculum as well as comments about lack of communication in general. The comments by teachers and administrators on collaboration nearly unanimously indicate no collaboration between the teachers in the gifted program and staff outside of the program.
- Parents also raised issues around communication of classroom activities and evaluation of student learning.
- The current reporting from EXTEND focuses on process behaviors rather than an evaluation of what has been learned, what students have accomplished, and/or levels of proficiency achieved through the curricular and instructional activities.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Develop a clear written policy around each aspect identified in this report (Identification, Professional Development, Curriculum, Program Services) based on broad-based examination of community values, cost effectiveness, and consideration of appropriate outcome goals and objectives for gifted students.
- Develop a communication plan for providing parents and the community with information on program services, curriculum, etc. (e.g., gifted education newsletter, periodic phone messages, email updates on scheduling, website for assignments and happenings in the classroom, etc.)
- As the program is refined (assuming recommendations for program service modifications are adopted), develop and foster communication between general education and gifted education teachers. Provide specific, scheduled opportunities for both parties to communicate curricular

goals, information on student academic achievement, common curricular and instructional planning time, and social and emotional development as often as possible (e.g., common planning time, designated professional development time).

## **IDENTIFICATION**

### **NAGC Standards on Student Identification**

- A comprehensive and cohesive process for student nomination must be coordinated in order to determine eligibility for gifted education services.
- Instruments used for student assessment to determine eligibility for gifted education services must measure diverse abilities, talents, strengths, and needs in order to provide students an opportunity to demonstrate any strengths.
- A student assessment profile of individual strengths and needs must be developed to plan appropriate intervention.
- All student identification procedures and instruments must be based on current theory and research.
- Written procedures for student identification must include, at the very least, provisions for informed consent, student retention, student reassessment, student exiting, and appeals procedures

### **COMMENDATIONS**

- School personnel have recognized issue of under-representation of minority and low-income students for the EXTEND program, and they have sought to use screening strategies that would lead to the identification of students for gifted services for underrepresented students (a universal screening tool).
- Teachers and administrators across the school division expressed openness to consideration of alternatives to better identify students and to provide programming that matched the educational needs of identified students.

### **PROBLEMS, ISSUES, AND CONCERNS**

- The current definition and identification procedures lead to the perpetuation of predominantly white, middle to upper-class group of identified students.

- Teachers and administrators alike felt that they really had little or no voice in the current review process. Several reported having their opinions and evidence being dismissed summarily in the discussions of placements. A dominant view was that the “deck is stacked” against minority and poor students. Data on students served confirms this view is justified. While the process on paper incorporates a team for decision making, the perception is very strong that the process of determining who will qualify for services appears to be under the purview of one person in the division.
- Informants reported over-identification of students in some schools, with little to no identification of students in other schools within the division. This disparity can be traced to socio-economic status of the students in the school, i.e., students of poverty are under-represented in gifted classrooms. Data on the schools from which students are selected verifies that this perception is warranted.
- Teachers have not received training to look for characteristics of giftedness as they may manifest in minority and low-income populations. Second, consideration of standardized test scores based on national norms may not reflect outstanding achievement of students relative to peers with equal opportunity to learn (see Lohman, 2013).
- The process of identification can be classified as one that requires students to clear multiple hurdles to be identified as gifted rather than a process. The hurdles as structured are more likely to unfairly eliminate students of poverty than other students.
- The appeals process has a fatal flaw in the inclusion of the same personnel who made the initial identification and placement decisions.

## **SUGGESTIONS**

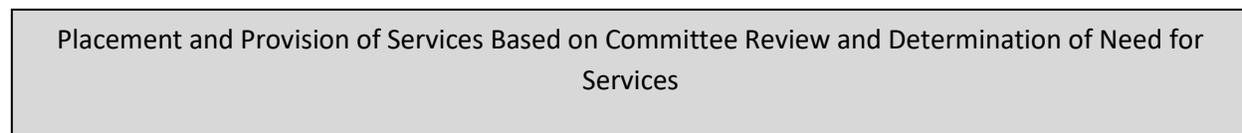
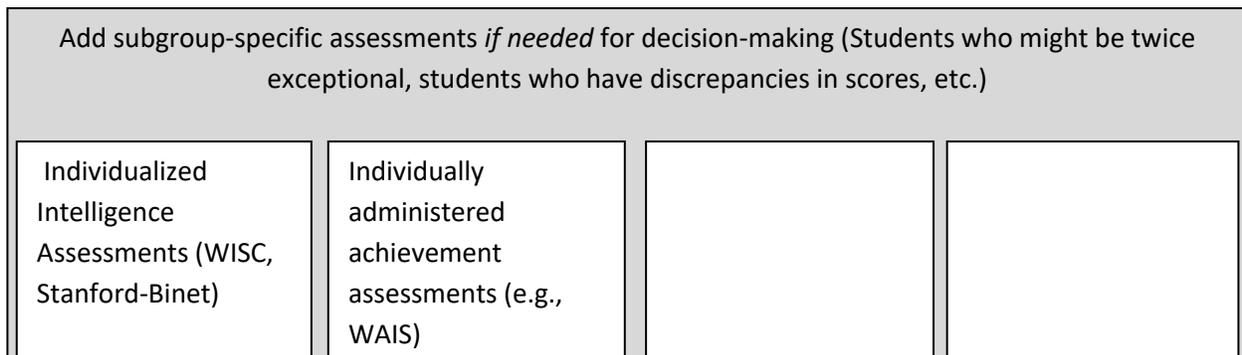
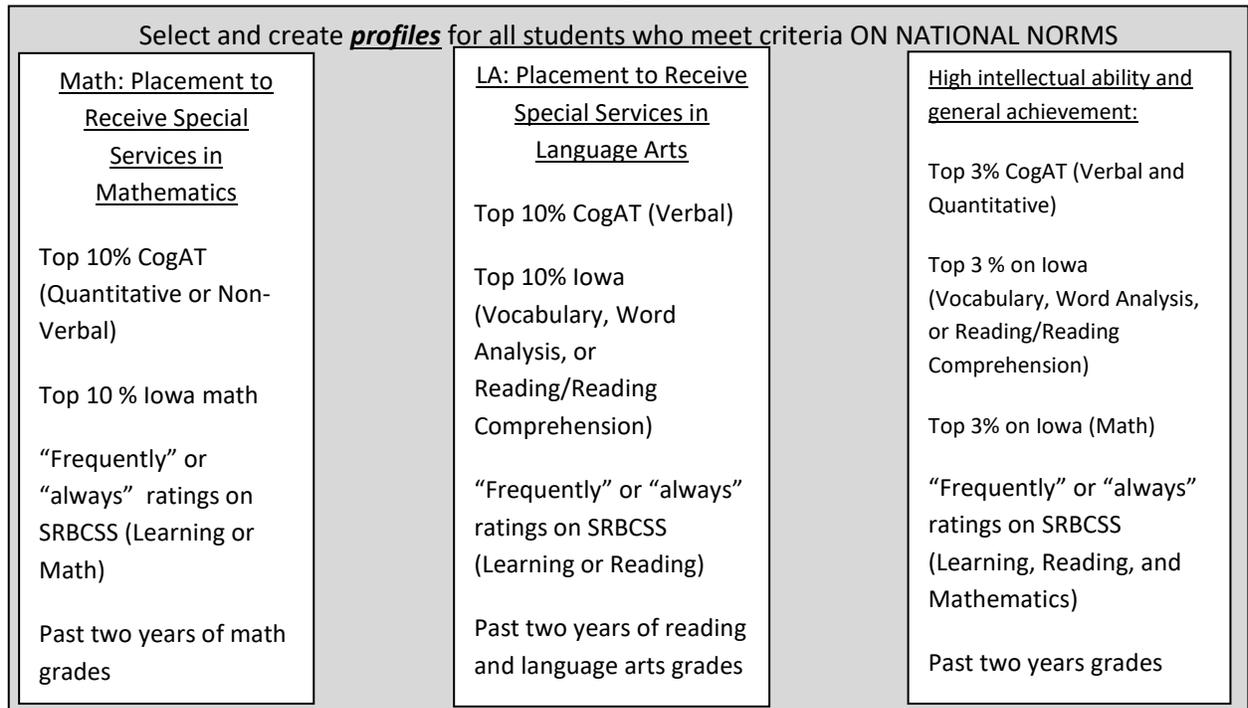
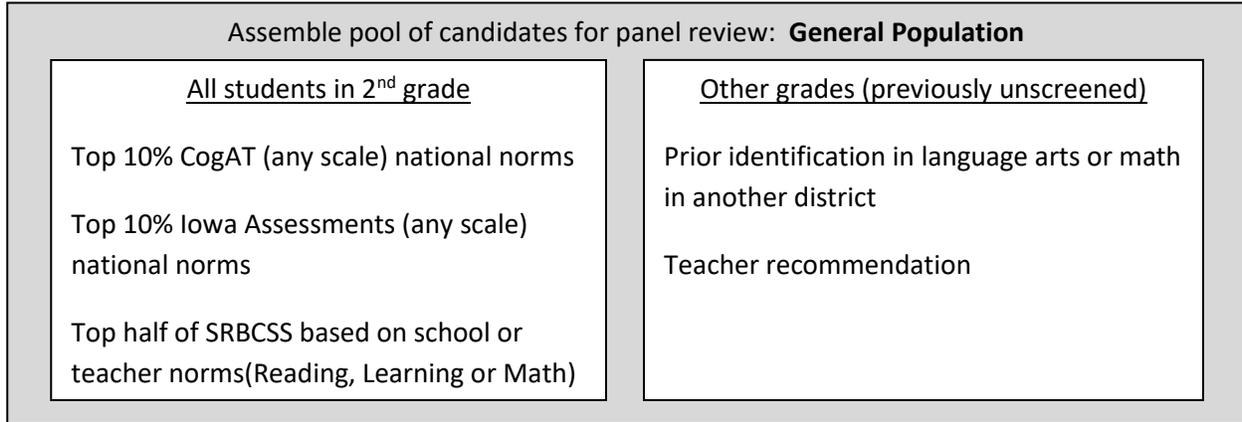
- Consider expanding the definition of giftedness to include specific academic ability in mathematics and language arts. Many educators in the school division voiced concerns that 1. There are many

students with specific aptitudes who should be served in gifted programming, and 2. Attempts to raise the issue of specific academic aptitude had been rejected with the comment, “That is not our definition of giftedness.” Definitions can be modified.

- Establish a committee that will determine who qualifies for gifted services *and* the services that will be provided on a student-by-student or talent area basis.
- We have provided a complete graphic outline for a suggested identification process (Appendix A) that would provide a more defensible screening and identification process to identify students who are characterized as exceptional in general cognitive ability as well as in specific academic areas.
- The process described for identification in Appendix A reflects the consideration of local norms (by school or full division) applied to a universal screening tool (the Cognitive Abilities Test (CogAT)). The use of the CogAT allows for consideration of general intellectual as well as more specific abilities including the area of non-verbal ability. Using the CogAT would eliminate need to use the NNAT and provide a more comprehensive assessment of talent across verbal, quantitative and non-verbal areas of ability. The CogAT can be administered by computer which yields scores immediately and eliminates the need for expending valuable teacher instructional time scoring. While issues were raised about the conflict with state testing the CogAT testing can be scheduled at a time when there would not be a conflict.
- Eliminate or limit use of teacher referrals and ratings unless teachers are trained in observing gifted behaviors across a variety of student populations.
- Create a talent development or nurturing program in Title 1 schools to encourage the development of gifted behaviors in children attending Title 1 schools. Use the resources that are not being efficiently deployed in the resource room context (see **Programming**) and funding that would be saved from transportation should the suggestion for programming options be adopted. See notes later in report.

- Choose a specific rating scale or set of rating scales that have validity and reliability data for screening for gifted students (see suggested identification process). Provide training for teachers on the use of rating scales to evaluate students for entry into the pool of potentially gifted students for further consideration and for evaluation for services. Focus the training on understanding the characteristics of gifted children in general AND on the ways those characteristics may be manifest in low income populations of gifted students.

APPENDIX A: Graphic Outline for Identification: General Population and Students Enrolled in Title 1 Schools



Assemble pool of candidates for panel review: **Title 1 School Students**

All students in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade

Top 10% CogAT (any of the three scales) **as determined by local norms for the school**

Top 10% Iowa (any scale) **as determined by local norms for the school and/or norms for second language learners** (Vocabulary, Word Analysis, Reading/Reading Comprehension, or Mathematics)

Top half of SRBCSS ratings on school or teacher norms (Learning, Reading, or Mathematics)

Other grades (previously unscreened)

Prior identification in language arts or math in another district

Teacher recommendation



Select and create **profiles** for all students who meet criteria **ON LOCAL NORMS FOR**

Math: Placement to Receive Special Services in Mathematics

Top 10% CogAT (quant or non-verbal)

Top 10% Iowa math

Frequently or always exhibiting ratings on SRBCSS (Learning or Math)

Past two years of math grades

LA: Placement to Receive Special Services in Language Arts

Top 10% CogAT (verbal)

Top 10% IOWA (Vocabulary, Word Analysis, Reading/Reading Comprehension)

Frequently or always exhibiting ratings SRBCSS (Learning or Reading)

Past two years of reading and language arts grades

High intellectual ability and general achievement

Top 10% CogAT (verbal and quantitative)

Top 10% on Iowa (Vocabulary, Word Analysis, or Reading Comprehension)

Top 10% on Iowa (Math)

Frequently or always exhibiting ratings SRBCSS (Learning, Reading, and Mathematics)

Past two years grades



Add subgroup-specific assessments *if needed* for decision-making (Students who might be twice exceptional, students who have discrepancies in scores, etc.)

Individualized Intelligence Assessments (e.g., WISC, Stanford-Binet)

Individually administered achievement assessments (e.g., WAIS)



Placement and Provision of Services as Determined by Committee Review for Need for Services beyond what is offered in that child's school